

Specification Grading

Course Grading Policy

For this course we will be using an alternative approach to assessing student learning called “specifications grading” or “specs” grading.¹

Instead of grading each assignment on a traditional ABCDF or 0-100 scale, submitted work will be assessed as Satisfactory / Unsatisfactory based on whether a student demonstrates the stated learning goals. Assignments will be “bundled” into three tiers that reflect a hierarchy of learning goals for the course. Final grades will be assigned based on which bundles of assignments a student satisfactorily completes—these final grades are not the goal or outcome of the course but are designed to indicate which learning goals students demonstrate that they accomplished.

All assignments in the course will be assessed as “Satisfactory” or “Unsatisfactory” (marked in Canvas as “Complete” or “Incomplete,” respectively), with the specifications required for Satisfactory articulated on each assignment. In general, Satisfactory should not be viewed as “minimally competent” (i.e., a traditional “C” grade), but rather as a mark of having achieved the assignment’s learning goals and specifications (i.e., equivalent to at least a “B” grade)—both of which will be stated in the assignment itself. Either an assignment meets the goals, or it does not – there is no gradation of assessment. You will receive clear and constructive feedback on your assignments to help you understand where you stand and how to improve.

The only letter grade that will be given in the course will be your final grade, and it will reflect the “bundles” of assignments and requirements you have satisfactorily accomplished in the class. That final letter grade is not an assessment of your intelligence, your abilities, or your value as a person—in fact, I never will grade “you” directly. Rather, the grade reflects what you demonstrated that you learned in the course and the commensurate effort you put in: no more, no less.

Built into this system is a good deal of choice as to how much you wish to learn and how hard you want to work to demonstrate and apply that learning. You are essentially choosing how much you wish to put into and get out of this class. You might choose that passing the course with a C is sufficient for your goals—a perfectly appropriate and respectable choice. If you strive to get an A in the course and maximize your learning, you should know that you are taking on that work and challenge yourself and should make sure you are in a personal and academic situation to achieve that level of engagement. Whatever goal you set for yourself, you will always know what is required of you to achieve that goal.

This makes explicit that which has always been true: While I, and your other instructors, are responsible for *teaching* you, you are responsible for your own *learning*. My goal as an instructor is to give you every opportunity to learn and master the course material and to assist you in your learning, but how much you (choose to) learn is on your shoulders.

Learning Goals:

All students who pass the course (with a minimum grade of C) will have demonstrated the ability to:

¹ If you’re curious about this approach, you can learn more at <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/01/19/new-ways-grade-more-effectively-essay>.

- Discuss what we have read in an open, accepting environment
- Demonstrate nuanced reading comprehension of a variety of texts/genres
- Express a contextual understanding of the works we have read and how they contribute to our present understanding
- Apply the methods and assumptions of literary analysis successfully to a diverse body of significant texts
- Write supported, persuasive, and nuanced interpretations of literary texts
- Apply specific vocabulary and concepts to explain a text's formal, cultural, and literary facets
- Communicate their ideas with fluency and clarity

Students who achieve a higher level of mastery (with a minimum grade of B) will have also demonstrated the ability to:

- Demonstrate nuanced close reading and analysis of literary texts employing literary terminology and techniques
- Analyze a text's formal, cultural, and literary facets with original insights and connections between different examples and contexts

Students who achieve the highest level of mastery (with a grade of A) will have also demonstrated the ability to:

- Demonstrate nuanced close reading and understanding of literary theory
- Create, substantiate, and communicate an original analytic argument that synthesizes multiple facets of a text and theoretical framework

See the “bundles” of assignments required for each grade below: [Specification Bundles](#).

Tokens & Flexibility:

Since every element of the course is assessed on an all-or-nothing basis, it might be stressful to strive for Satisfactory given that the stakes for not meeting that threshold may be significant. To ease stress, to allow for flexibility—and most of all, to maximize opportunities for learning—every student starts the course with 3 virtual “tokens” that can be “exchanged” for some leniency or opportunities for revision.

A token can be exchanged for one of the following:

- The opportunity to re-do a single Unsatisfactory Discussion Post or Response assignment. Each assignment can only be re-attempted once.
- To cancel out a single missed Discussion Post or Response assignment. A canceled-out post will not be counted against you but will not be marked as Satisfactory. This can only be done once, regardless of the number of tokens you have.
- The opportunity to revise a single Unsatisfactory Essay or Writing Exercise (except for Essay 2)
- To receive a 48-hour deadline extension on any single assignment (except for Essay 2 and any peer review). This can only be done once for any individual assignment and should be requested before the submission deadline.

I will track each student's tokens throughout the semester. There will be opportunities to earn additional tokens later in the semester.

Submitting Class Work and Peer Review

Assignments are due on Canvas at the specified time on the due date. Unless otherwise noted, all formal assignments should be formatted with 12-point Times New Roman Font, one-inch margins on all sides, no extra space between paragraphs, and double-spacing between lines (and no extra space between paragraphs). You should keep all of your assignments as they are handed back to you. All essay assignments and drafts submitted to Canvas must be Microsoft Word documents (with .doc or .docx extensions).

For every Essay assignment you will have to submit a complete polished draft, which will be reviewed by your peers on Canvas. After your peers have reviewed and commented on your paper, you will then revise and resubmit the assignment for the final grade. Late drafts will NOT be accepted and will not be made available for peer review. It will be your responsibility to seek peer review or help from the Miller Writing Center separately. In addition, failure to complete your peer review assignment by the specified deadline will result in an automatic Unsatisfactory for the Essay.

Specification Bundles (Example):

Assignment Group	C Bundle Requirements	B Bundle Requirements	A Bundle Requirements
Discussion Posts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete all 13 • Satisfactory on 10/13 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete all 13 • Satisfactory on 11/13 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete all 13 • Satisfactory on 12/13
Discussion Responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete all 13 • Satisfactory on 10/13 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete all 13 • Satisfactory on 11/13 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete all 13 • Satisfactory on 12/13
Discussion Responses Extra	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfactory on 3 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfactory on 5
Essay 1: Close Reading Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full Draft Submitted • Peer Review Completed • Satisfactory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full Draft Submitted • Peer Review Completed • Satisfactory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full Draft Submitted • Peer Review Completed • Satisfactory
Essay 2: Literary Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full Draft Submitted • Peer Review Completed • Satisfactory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full Draft Submitted • Peer Review Completed • Satisfactory
Writing Exercise 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfactory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfactory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfactory
Writing Exercise 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfactory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfactory
Writing Exercise 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfactory

Specifications for Satisfactory (Example):

Think of the following specifications as a checklist. This is essentially a list of the types of things your essay should do. Exactly how you do it is up to you.

To be considered Satisfactory, the essay must do the following:

Thesis/ Claim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Present a strong and arguable thesis statement that clearly answers the prompt—not just an observation about the passage but an argument regarding the effects/implications/significance of the elements in this passage on the meaning of the text or how they contribute to a deeper understanding of the passage/text <input type="checkbox"/> Provide a clear indication of where the rest of the paper is headed and reasons for accepting the claim (a plan of development) <input type="checkbox"/> Weave the central claim throughout the essay as a clear thread of argumentation tying ideas to the thesis statement
Content/ Ideas/ Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Break ideas up into separate body paragraphs (at least 2) with clear topic sentences for each paragraph <input type="checkbox"/> Incorporate compelling and relevant textual evidence (providing examples/quotations—at least 1 per paragraph) to support the close reading in each paragraph <input type="checkbox"/> Provide strong and clear analysis of the significance of the examples/quotations and explanation <input type="checkbox"/> Provide a clear and persuasive explanation of how each example/quotation supports the topic sentence and/or thesis statement <input type="checkbox"/> Present a clear and consistent explanation of ideas <input type="checkbox"/> Exhibit a clear understanding of the text and the evidence
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Includes description, explanation and analysis, and consistently blends them effectively <input type="checkbox"/> Organization is coherent, and consistently smooth and logical <input type="checkbox"/> Clear, logical and smooth transitions <input type="checkbox"/> Clear progression of ideas
Writing and Rhetorical Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Be written in a clear and interesting manner <input type="checkbox"/> Exhibit strong control of language <input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrate clear signs of revision/proofreading <input type="checkbox"/> Contain few or no sentence structure, grammar, spelling, or other mechanical errors <input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrate clear audience awareness <input type="checkbox"/> Maintain an appropriate and consistent tone for the audience/purpose/genre
Assignment Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Be submitted on Canvas by the due date and time specified <input type="checkbox"/> Consist of at least 2 full pages <input type="checkbox"/> Contain no unnecessary filler or padding (i.e., fluff) <input type="checkbox"/> Meet formatting and assignment requirements (12-point Times New Roman font, one-inch margins on all sides, no extra space between paragraphs, no superfluous spacing) <input type="checkbox"/> Contains completely correct in-text citations following any quotation or paraphrase <input type="checkbox"/> Includes a works cited page for any texts referenced in the essay that is correct, precisely following MLA citation format, and in correct alphabetical order